

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

July 13<sup>th</sup> 2021

Bhupindar Singh, Representative to US Government and UN

Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) America

**Degrading State of Religious Freedom in India's Electoral Autocracy and its Transatlantic Expansion**

**State of Religious Freedom in India**

Some of the world's most populous countries like China, Indonesia, Russia and India-impose high or very high levels of restrictions on religion and simultaneously on the countries that tend to impose such restrictions through the government laws and policies, favoring religious groups and restricting activities for certain religious minorities. The **government imposition of restriction**<sup>1</sup> also involves harassment of religious groups. Another type of restriction includes the **social hostilities** that tends to increase the inter-religious tension and violence, religious violence by organized groups and individual and social harassment<sup>2</sup>.

The continuous degrading of the religious freedom was noted in the 2020 Freedom House report which categorized India to be 'partly free' and the more depth and broader report by Swedish V-Dem institute declared India to be 'elected autocracy'<sup>3</sup>. India continues to be site of numerous reported human rights violations, and almost all of them are either facilitated by state or non-state actors.

***Controversial CAA implemented without rules:*** With rules nowhere in sight, on May 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, Modi government silently allowed 5 more states to implement the religion based citizenship in a gazette notification order issued to collectors from those states. In total 10 states are in process of implementation<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>

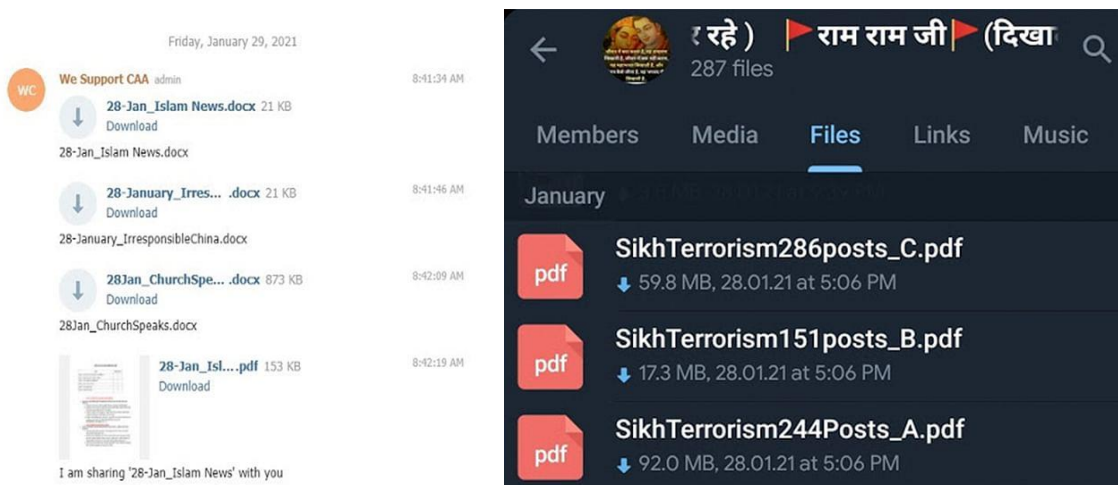
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/swedish-institute-calls-india-electoral-autocracy-rahul-says-no-longer-a-democratic-country-as-autocratic-as-pakistan-7224589/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://theprint.in/india/governance/with-caa-rules-nowhere-in-sight-centre-allows-5-states-to-implement-religion-based-citizenship/667878/>

## **Uttar Pradesh as a National Laboratory for testing Hindutva and furthering Hindu-Muslim inter-religious tensions**

Under this section we would shed light on how the inter-religious tensions and social hostilities are being propagated by the Modi government star leader Kapil Mishra through his Hindu Ecosystem app.



Above are 2 different screenshots which are just an elaboration of a drop in ocean. The BJP Kapil Mishra, under his new project Hindu Ecosystem<sup>5</sup> is leading a network of over 35000 people who are working in an organized fashion to create and spread communal hatred, bigotry and hindutva across the social media platforms. This app was released on November 27, 2020, Mishra announced his first campaign using the hashtag #JoinHinduEcosystem. *The app also lists various mosques to be destroyed and replaced by Hindu temples*<sup>6</sup>. The real motive behind this app is to establish the 'Hindu in Danger' narrative.

The app further explores special interests on cow protection, Hindutva project converting minorities into Hindus and becoming a member of his project online and on ground. Additional projects include 'Halal' and 'fight love Jihad' (Muslim men marrying Hindu girls or vice versa). Increasingly, the ideology of Hindutva is pared down to an agenda of anti-Muslim hate and the Hindu Ecosystem appears to fashion itself as an executive arm.

The Twitter platform is used to spam the glory of Hindu Ecosystem and web of mass and fake news is being spread out, to push Hindutva ideology through this app. Some of the list of extensive topics include, but not limited to: *Sanatan Dharma-Beyond the geographical boundary of India, Glorious Temples-Amazing Temples-architecture, timeline, king, vs world building's, Hindu temples contributing in developments -schools, colleges, foods, shelter, economy, Lost temples (replaced by church and masjid), Hindu revolutionaries – as local as possible-in reference to Freedom Struggle, Hindu Holocaust – exact killing of Hindus, Wrong teachings in school- College*

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/02/15/we-infiltrated-the-telegram-groups-of-the-bjp-leaders-online-network-to-see-what-they-do>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/02/15/we-infiltrated-the-telegram-groups-of-the-bjp-leaders-online-network-to-see-what-they-do>

*books-Academic and cultural invasion, hindu minority in states – Demography and Government policies, migration of Hindu due to demographic loss and future of Hindu<sup>7</sup>.*

Aside from tweets, resource materials and toolkits are often shared with titles, “Islam News”, ‘Irresponsible China’ and ‘Church Speaks’, ‘Kisan Andolan’ (Farmers Protest)”.

### **COVID -19 and deliberate Modi Government attack on Muslims and favoritism for Hindus**

**Anti-Muslim Conspiracy theory:** As the decade’s old controversial topic of demolition of centuries old Babri mosque was made to rest in bed with building of Lord Ram Temple instead. Another conspiracy theory ignited against muslims for spreading COVID, the Modi government through the national media outlets started the conspiracy theories targeting Muslims for spread of coronavirus in India. The troubles began when gathering for Islamic Missionary organization, Tablighi Jamaat was singled out. Senior leadership from ruling BJP party accused Tablighi Jamaat of conducting a “Taliban crime”, described their members as Human Bombs and called for Jamaat leaders to be both hanged and shot.

During the Anti-CAA march by Muslims, star BJP and Hindutva leaders Kapil Mishra<sup>8</sup>, Anurag Thakur and Narasinghananad gave instigating speeches that led to the mass killings of Muslims in North-East Delhi which left scores dead. The impunity offered to these leaders sends a direct message to the Hindutva activities that they have nothing to fear even if they were directly complicit in the violence. The Delhi police open support in the staged pogrom of Muslims in North East Delhi points out the level to which government was prepared to kill Muslims, likely similar to the pattern of 1984 Sikh Genocide or Muslim Pogrom by Modi in Gujarat in 2002. During an Interview to The Wire, Kapil Mishra emphasized, “If it happens like that again, I will do it again”.

Several case of assault, harassment, Muslim business being boycotted have come into the notice during the peak of COVID. The volunteers distributing rations (food) to impoverished were targeted and called ‘Coronavirus terrorists’. Muslims have been accused of spitting on foods and infecting water supply lines with virus from various parts of country. Posters have appeared barring Muslims from entering certain neighborhood in states as far apart as Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Karnataka, Telangana and Madhya Pradesh<sup>9</sup>. The Muslim youths are being continuously targeted as part of the anti-Muslim conspiracy theory to spread coronavirus to Hindus nationwide. The terms of corona bombs, corona, jihads and corona terrorists are frequently referred for Muslims<sup>10</sup>.

Controversial BJP leaders Tejaswi Surya and some local BJP leaders didn’t hesitate to give a communal color to a COVID facility where he read out the names of 17 staff members of muslim

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/02/15/we-infiltrated-the-telegram-groups-of-the-bjp-leaders-online-network-to-see-what-they-do>

<sup>8</sup> <https://thewire.in/communalism/kapil-mishra-interview-delhi-riots-hindutva-communal-fear-bjp>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-targeting-muslims-spread-in-india>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-targeting-muslims-spread-in-india>

origin in Bengaluru hospital, and questioned the officer in charge with real intention behind recruiting those staff<sup>11</sup>.

***Favoritism for Hindus:*** In the middle of 2nd wave of COVID in May 2021, amid a huge number of people testing positive for delta variant, Modi government allowed the mass congregation of Hindus, Kumbh Mela, gathering in the State of Uttar Pradesh. The Kumbh Mela attendees further became super spreaders of delta variant that took quantum of lives within days. Modi himself was the biggest promoter of this event in an attempt to appease hindu voters<sup>12</sup>.

### **Anti-Religious Conversion Law**

The BJP State government's of Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat have passed the fundamentally unconstitutional religious Conversion bills and a common feature of all three laws is the declaration of such marriages as "null and void" and the penalizing of conversions done without the prior approval of the state, they differ in the quantum of punishment prescribed, and in attributing the burden of proof that a conversion is lawful. Every state sets their punishment statement on Love Jihad law to appease PM Modi.

***Hindutva Groups enforcing religious conversion law:*** The Hindutva groups are working with the Uttar Pradesh police to enforce the implementation of religious conversion law and further the cause to legitimize the anti-Muslim conspiracy theory<sup>13</sup>. In another shocking incident on July 9th 2021 under the heavy guard of police, in an event organized by Hindu militant outfits; Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang, the BJP spokesperson *Suraj Pal Amu* in a hate filled speech on 'Love Jihad' called for selecting and cutting the throats of Muslims one by one.<sup>14</sup>

***Police and Media vigilantes and goons:*** In another case of religious conversion, a girl from UP has been harassed by police and media for converting to Islam, She sought the Delhi High Court protection for her life from police and media<sup>15</sup>.

### **Undemocratic India's Agricultural laws 2020 and protesting Sikhs labeled as terrorist**

Farming holds the religious significance for Sikhs. While the protests are a broad movement seeking equal rights for people from all backgrounds, and while it is not a religious element, per se, there is a notable religious dimension to it<sup>16</sup>. The Sikh Gurus have called on Sikhs to follow their example to live as saint-soldiers and to stand up for the justice without regard for consequences. Nowhere in the world one can imagine the government planting, plotting and orchestrating the repressive tactics against its own citizenry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Every state

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<sup>11</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/bangalore/bengaluru-covid-bed-blocking-scam-chorus-grows-against-bjp-leaders-for-allegedly-trying-to-communalise-issue-7302994/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://qz.com/india/1996084/modi-governments-silence-over-kumbh-mela-shows-its-bias/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2021/07/03/love-jihad-law-india/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/after-can-cut-throats-speech-by-haryana-bjp-official-suraj-pal-amu-no-police-action-2483208>

<sup>15</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/up-woman-conversion-court-police-7381644/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/indian-farmer-protests-are-animated-by-sikh-faith-punjabi-history-of-fighting-injustice>

machinery ranging from the Supreme Court of India to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has been put in place to defame, discredit and disband this peaceful protest. NIA notices were served to Sikh activists, farmer union leader/s, truck drivers and even journalists over their coverage, in support of farmers protests<sup>17 18</sup>. Modi's Government and its representatives have time and again executed the valedictorian act of labeling farmers as Terrorists, Khalistanis, Pakistanis and Tukde-Tukde gang etc. due to their Sikhs religious history of justice.<sup>19</sup>

The intentional presence of loopholes in the laws at first place and then agreeing to amend almost all those provisions in 3 laws after rounds of table talks clearly point towards the malicious intentions of Modi Government and strong nexus the private corporate players have with government<sup>20</sup>.

The strongly condemnable incident of violence which occurred on January 26<sup>th</sup> 2021 at the Republic Day tractor parade is the result of Modi Government's egoistic and dictatorial stand on this issue. The anti-social elements were intentionally embedded in the tractor parade and rioting was instigated by the Modi Government to discredit the farmers protest and blame Sikh farmers for unrest in the national capital<sup>21</sup>. Several anti-Sikh tweets were made by people aligned with the BJP, calling for the 'Repeat 1984' 'Missing Indira Gandhi'. One of the handle 'Kreately' was created by the mastermind of the Delhi February 2020 Muslim pogroms, BJP leader Kapil Mishra.<sup>22 23</sup> This call for repeat of 1984 Sikh genocide is one of the agenda items of Hindu Ecosystem.

### **Christianity viewed as Islamic invaders**

The idea of Hindu ekta, hardwired into the RSS, was always implicit about Hindu society closing ranks against so-called external threats, most often characterized as Islamic invaders but also Christian missionaries<sup>24</sup>. The Hindu Ecosystem makes this explicit. Without a so-called Islamic/Christian threat to ward off, it seems, the system cannot hold<sup>25</sup>. The churches and its followers across India are under continuous attack since Modi gained power and these attacks have risen in 2021. On March 14<sup>th</sup> 2021, Eight Christians were injured and hospitalized when Hindu radicals attacked them and accused them of religious conversion in the central Indian state

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/nia-summons-two-journalists-farmer-leaders-for-questioning>

<sup>18</sup> <https://thefederal.com/news/nia-has-issued-notices-to-dozens-of-punjabi-and-sikh-activists-taking-part-in-the-farmers-protest/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/rajasthan-bjp-mp-triggers-row-says-terrorists-khalistan-supporters-sitting-at-farm-protest-sites-7154965/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/suit-boot-ki-sarkar-farmers-boycott-call-is-the-first-serious-challenge-to-ambani-and-adani>

<sup>21</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/antisocial-elements-were-behind-violence-during-tractor-parade-farmer-leader-rakesh-tikait/articleshow/80470331.cms>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.boomlive.in/politics/farmers-protests-anti-sikh-tweets-twitter-republic-day-tractor-rally-hate-speech-violence-delhi-khalistan-rhetoric-1984-riots-11761>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.thequint.com/cyber/twitter-500-accounts-suspended-violent-calls-repeat-of-1984-red-fort-sikh-farmers>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.ozy.com/the-new-and-the-next/is-the-hindu-right-targeting-churches-again/268729/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://scroll.in/article/978782/why-the-new-hindu-ecosystem-that-bjp-leader-kapil-mishra-is-aiming-to-build-sounds-so-menacing>

of Chattisgarh<sup>26</sup>. More than 150 Christians were praying in a house church on March 8 in Dantewada district when the Hindus attacked them with axes, stones and wooden clubs, injuring several of them, local media reported. According to Pastor Samson Bhagel from Bastar District, Chattisgarh, Christians are living in a sense of fear and insecurity as Hindu groups use false and fraudulent claims of religious conversion in churches under strong police support<sup>27</sup>.

A report by ADF International released in November 2020 cites that more than 200 attacks on Christians in India have been recorded in 2020 itself as recorded by United Christian Forum Violence Monitor. Despite the escalation of COVID 19 cases the attack on religious minorities have not reduced and atleast one attack per day is taking place on a Christian in India<sup>28</sup>. In February 2021, two Christian worship services were attacked in Madhya Pradesh by same mob group consisting of 100 radical nationalists accusing them of religious conversion under the state's new anti-conversion law<sup>29</sup>. Similar incident was reported from Odisha on May 27<sup>th</sup> 2021 when a mob of 150 ransacked the Christian Place of worship in Bodoguda<sup>30</sup>.

### **Transatlantic expansion of Hindutva**

The Hindu nationalist organizations has embedded and established their presence in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia among the strong Indian diaspora. The Hindutva network based in most of these foreign countries strongly draws their ideology from Hindu Nationalist organizations in India.

**Prof. Audrey Truschke:** A critical scholar and senior professor from Rutgers University, focuses her study to understand the perils of Hindutva in the society<sup>31</sup>. Due to her outspoken and critical views, she has continuously received death threats from members of Hindutva organization from US as well from other parts of world. On April 14<sup>th</sup> 2021, she blocked nearly 7500 twitter handles those repetitively called to kill her and rape her two daughters aged 5 and 6<sup>32</sup>.

**VHP in New South Wales Schools:** During an Assembly session, Senator David Shoebridge strongly objected to the presence of Hindu Militant outfit Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in the schools in New South Wales and their role in designing school curriculum. He went on to ask: *Are these neo-Nazi groups on the government's radar, and if so, what is going to be done about it*<sup>33</sup>. He also raised the serious concern on the hate crime and bigotry raised by the members of these Hindu Militant organization in New South Wales against the members of Sikh community for their protest against farming bills in India.

**India in the News:** In a response to the international media's critical glare of mass COVID deaths, heavy underreporting and undercounting of the COVID deaths and mass mishandling by Modi,

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.ucanews.com/news/eight-indian-christians-hospitalized-after-attack-by-hindu-mob/91755#>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.persecution.org/2021/03/11/mob-attacks-christian-worship-service-india-axes-stones-clubs/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://adfinternational.org/news/one-attack-per-day-on-christians-in-india/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.persecution.org/2021/02/22/two-christian-worship-services-central-india-attacked-mob/>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Orissa,-Hindu-fundamentalists-destroy-church-under-construction--53261.html>

<sup>31</sup> <https://twitter.com/audreytruschke/status/1377941610768519173>

<sup>32</sup> <https://twitter.com/audreytruschke/status/1382324369964347394?lang=en>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/australian-senator-flags-issue-of-violence-by-extremist-right-wing-hindu-nationalists>

the Embassy of India started a programme '*India in the News*' to lure Hindu / Indian students in US. This platform was aimed to stop criticism by US media outlets/agencies and commissions critical of Modi's work, human rights violation and help Modi run his religious hate crime propaganda machinery crucial for his image management<sup>34</sup>.

### **Forceful implementation of Vague laws; UAPA, AFSPA, NSA, PSA on religious minorities**

The Indian legislature has made laws that have not only neglected fundamental rights, but also contradicted them. Often the use of these draconian laws has continued well after the circumstances in which they were created have passed. But they have endowed the state with excess powers to violate constitutionally guaranteed rights at both the individual and community level. India's carefully designed UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act), AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act), NSA (National Security Act), PSA (Public Safety Act)<sup>35</sup> has been on most occasions been invoked against Human Rights Defenders, activists and against those organization and individuals which according to Modi government are against their Hindutva promoting bills and laws in India.

Father Stan Swamy; the 84-year-old, a human rights activist for Dalits and ailing from Parkinson and advanced age, had his least breadth on July 5<sup>th</sup> where he was treated for COVID 19<sup>36</sup>. He would remain as one of the oldest person to be charged under stringent UAPA law. He was denied sipper and straw pending an appeal before NIA, which sought 20 days to reply<sup>37</sup>. In the words of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in her statement, Bachelet expressed regret "at the tightening of space for human rights NGOs in particular, including by the application of vaguely worded laws" that constrain their activities and restrict foreign funding<sup>38</sup>. She further reiterated the lack of conformity of UAPA law in line with international human rights standards.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Most of the first world countries are not prepared to deal with hate crime, bigotry and communal disharmony posed by Hindutva organizations and are dependent on US prestigious bodies. Lantos Commission congressional members must urge State Department to categorize India into the list of Countries of Particular Concern.
2. US State Department may consider taking note of effective diplomatic tool; public designation, on state and non-state actors involved in religious freedom violations in India.
3. The systemic pattern of violence by Hindutva organizations across transatlantic border should be noted and categorized as 'Entities of Particular Concern'.
4. The Lantos Commission Congressional Members must adopt more cases of Religious Prisoner's of Conscience or Belief from India and so should other International Human Rights organizations.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/indian-embassy-student-volunteers-course-correct-biased-us-media-narrative-covid-19>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/indias-unforgivable-laws>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-57479762>

<sup>37</sup> <https://thewire.in/rights/stan-swamy-straw-sipper-nia-elgar-parishad>

<sup>38</sup> <https://theprint.in/india/india-using-vaguely-defined-laws-to-stifle-voices-of-activists-says-un-human-rights-chief/527564/>